

CHRISTIAN CHRONOLOGY

(How the distinction between the Old and New Calendar arose)

Protopresbyter George D. Metallinos

ΠΡΩΤΟΠΡΕΣΒΥΤΕΡΟΥ
ΓΕΩΡΓΙΟΥ Δ. ΜΕΤΑΛΛΗΝΟΥ

ΑΝΤΙΜΕΤΩΠΟΙ
ΜΕ ΤΗΝ ΠΛΑΝΗ...



ΕΚΔΟΣΕΙΣ «ΟΡΘΟΔΟΞΟΣ ΚΥΨΕΛΗ»

1. Time is understood in Christian terms as the framework within which the revelation of God unfolds, and the salvation of humanity and the sanctification of creation and history is accomplished. It thus has soteriological significance, always connected to the development within it of the plan of “divine economy.” For this reason, it is not understood circularly, as an endless recurrence, but linearly. Its flow is unrepeatable, with unique and saving events, “*once for all*” and “*in perpetuity*.” The centre and “entelechy” of linear –straight– time is Christ, the Alpha and the Omega of history, the Beginning and the End. The Christian perspective is permanently eschatological and, from this, draws the content of the Church's perceptions regarding time.

World and time are conceived in Christianity as the creation of the Triadic God “*out of nothing*,” outside of any notion of “archetypes” or “ideas” in God. Any concept of “analogy,” moreover, between “created” (of creation) and “Uncreated” (Triadic God) is non-existent in Christian (Orthodox) thought. The world and time have a beginning and an end, a destination, and a “fullness” (Gal. 4:4). Therefore, God creates time as the “*creator of all things, of the ages and of all that exists*” (St. John of Damascus). God is “*He who has fashioned the nature of time*” (St. Basil the Great). St. Gregory the Theologian particularly defines the relativity of time, as he describes it as “*that which is divided and measured by movement*.” The movement of the Earth and other celestial bodies creates the awareness of temporality and its “measurement.” In reality, the measurement of time is conventional for the Church, as the “*body of Christ*” and “*communion in Christ*.” However, since the Church lives and moves in the world, even though it is not “*of the world*” (John 18:36), it has accepted in its course the calendars in use by the societies in which its fullness lived and struggled for their salvation. It should be noted that Christian-Orthodox salvation is not any escape from time and the world but the victory over the evil of the world, sin. Therefore, calendars are an “addendum” to Christianity for arranging worldly conventions without submission to them.

When we speak of the Christian world, we mean the new political entity that, starting as an informal Christian commonwealth in the first three centuries A.D., appears as a structured political-state entity with the inauguration of New Rome – Constantinople on May 11, 330 (= Roman Empire of New Rome). Until the 6th-7th century, the Christian world used local or national calendars and dates according to the system of the nations. It does not have a unified and standard calendar, nor does it begin its chronology from Christ. Due to its relationship with the Old Testament (the prophetic tradition), Christianity initially accepted the Jewish determination of the world's age, which naturally differs considerably from the scientific calculation. Only in 691 AD was the Christian determination of the world's age established, with the 3rd canon of the Quinisext Council “*in Trullo*” calculating the “creation” to be 5,508 years before the incarnation of Christ. This was accepted by the entire Christian world, which had already begun to politically and later spiritually-culturally differentiate into “Eastern” and “Western.” Therefore, the first chronological determination in Christian terms is “*from the creation of the world*.”

2. The existing freedom within the global Christian community is evident from establishing feasts as early as the first Christian centuries. The Christian feasts were determined based on the solar calendar, the Julian calendar, which began to be applied in 45 BC. Thus, the conception of the Forerunner was set on September 23, and the conception of Jesus Christ (Annunciation to the Theotokos), according to the Gospel narrative, six months later, on March 25. Correspondingly, the Birth of the Forerunner was established on June 24 and that of Christ finally on December 25, taking into account the equinoxes and solstices and the symbolic interpretation of the Forerunner's words about Christ: "*He must increase, but I must decrease*" (John 3:30). The criteria, that is, are spiritual and not worldly or scientific. However, it must not be forgotten that the political year began in the East on September 23, which was also the beginning of the Indiction until 460, when it was moved to September 1. This last date also acquired ecclesiastical significance as the beginning of the liturgical year, which is still applicable today. It is not known exactly when this practice started, but it is attested in the 8th century.

The same freedom is evident in the movement of Christian feasts. The case of the celebration of Pascha is a classic example, but we will return to this. Something similar also happened with Christmas. Until 336 AD, it was celebrated together with Theophany on January 6 (according to the Julian calendar). However, that year in the West, the feast was moved to December 25, primarily to counter the feasts of Mithras - the Sun god, which took place during the winter solstice. In the East, the new date of the feast was introduced around 380. Following this, the dates of other feasts connected with Christmas were determined (Circumcision, Presentation, Annunciation, etc.).

Here, we must mention the Roman system of Indictions, which was also followed by the Christian world. *Indictio* means "determination" and was initially linked to the tax system of the Roman Empire. This system began under Emperor Diocletian (297/8) but with a duration of the Indiction of 5 years. For the first time, the Indiction, with a duration of 15 years, begins in 312 A.D. (the first mention in imperial documents is in 356/7). Ecclesiastically, it was accepted in 327, starting on September 24. Therefore, the Indiction period of 15 years is used to date documents and events. After the completion of this time period, a new Indiction would begin, and the reference year would be determined (first, second, etc. - something similar to the system of Olympiads). The usual Indiction is called Byzantine or Greek and begins, as mentioned, on September 1. This system prevailed throughout the Christian world during the Byzantine period but continued in post-Byzantine Greek texts (the patriarchal ethnarchic texts).

3. The dating from the Birth of Jesus Christ begins in the 6th century A.D. The new system was the inspiration of Dionysius the Small, or Exiguus, a Scythian by origin and by profession, a monk, canonist, and chronologist. Around 500, he settled in Rome and engaged in chronological issues (such as the Paschal tables). In the composition of his work *Cyclus Decem Novennalis*

(532) for the calculation of Pascha, he immortalised his name by noting the years of the table based on the dating from the Birth of Christ and not “from the founding of Rome,” as was done in the West, or from Abraham or the 1st Olympiad. The new dating spread gradually in the West (France and England), and the first historian to use it consistently was Venerable Bede in the 8th century. Since then, it has been adopted throughout the Christian and non-Christian worlds, as is the case today. However, Dionysius made a fatal error. He accepted the year 754 A.U.C. (from the founding of Rome, *“Ab urbe condita”*) as the year of Christ's birth, whereas it is known that Herod died in 750/51, shortly after the massacre of the innocents (Matthew 2:16), and Christ was about two years old at the time of the massacre of the innocents. Therefore, he must have been born in the year 748/749 A.U.C. Thus, the current dating is behind by 5 or 6 years, and today we are in 2018 or 2019 A.D. [This article was published in 2013].

4. However, despite the conventionality of calendars and the measurement of time in Christian consciousness, chronological determination has significantly impacted Christian society regarding important theological issues, such as the celebration of Pascha. The Christian Pascha, typologically linked to the Jewish Passover (paschal lamb - *“slain lamb/Christ”*; cf. Rev. 5:12), was established by the Apostles for the “remembrance” (experience, that is) of Christ's crucifixion. However, the content of the feast and the day of its celebration caused serious problems. Judaizing Christians emphasised the event of the Crucifixion and celebrated the 14th of Nissan along with the Jews (the Quartodecimans) of Asia Minor.

On the contrary, Christians from the Gentiles emphasised the Resurrection of Christ. They associated Pascha with Sunday, the resurrection day of the week, after the 14th of Nisan, so that it would not coincide with the Jewish Passover. The issue in the 2nd century took the form of a dispute between the Churches of Rome and Asia Minor, as both sides had their supporters. Indeed, the disagreement did not lead to a schism, with the intervention of enlightened Shepherds (Anicetus of Rome, Polycarp of Smyrna, Irenaeus of Lyons, etc.). Still, the solution to the issue was provided by the First Ecumenical Council (325), which established the celebration of Pascha on the first Sunday after the (first) full moon of the vernal equinox so that it would never coincide with the Jewish one, since *“Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us”* (1 Cor. 5:7). The Patriarch of Alexandria (the city had a tradition in astronomical science due to the Greek astronomers there) took on the responsibility of announcing the date of Pascha every year to the Christian world. Therefore, to calculate the date of Pascha, the date of the first vernal full moon is necessary. Thus, the Christian community also follows the scientific determination of the vernal equinox.

Dionysius the Small accepted the first vernal full moon following March 20 as the first vernal full moon, and consequently, the celebration of Pascha falls between March 22 and April 25. From the 7th century, special tables known as Paschalia began to be compiled, which determined the date of the Pascha celebration over a long series of years. The popular expression *“I lost the*

Paschalia" refers to confusion in determining something and originates from the discrepancies in the date of the Pascha.

5. The Paschalia came to be compiled based on the Julian calendar, which was also relied upon by the First Ecumenical Council. However, this calendar has inaccuracies, specifically a mistake of 0.008 days per year. By 1582, this error had accumulated to ten days under Pope Gregory XIII in Rome. Thus, the spring equinox coincided with March 11th. This flaw was identified by the Council of Trent in 1545, which decided to correct the mistake. This task was ultimately undertaken by Pope Gregory XIII (1572-1585) with the collaboration of the Jesuit astronomer Christophorus Clavius (1537-1612) and based on the proposals of the astronomer Luigi Lilio (\dagger 1576). The related papal bull appeared in February 1582. The spring equinox was restored to March 21st, and the duration of the year was accepted as 365.2422 days, leading to an error of 3.12 days over a span of four hundred years. Thus, the recognition of a leap year emerged for the last year of every fourth century, meaning the year that is exactly divisible by 4. Therefore, while the years 1700, 1800, and 1900 were not leap years, the last year of the 20th century, 2000, was a leap year. The papal bull established rules for the celebration of Pascha and imposed January 1st as the beginning of the year.

In this context, however, we must pause to consider the determination of the equinoxes, as it is the focal point of the discussion that led to the difference between the East and the West regarding the celebration of Pascha. With the Julian calendar, due to the elliptical orbit of the Earth, the duration of one calendar year, the length of day and night, varies by up to 6 hours. When the day is 9 hours long, the night is 15, and vice versa. However, twice a year, day and night have equal hours (12). This is called an equinox. With the Julian calendar, the equinoxes during the First Ecumenical Council occurred on March 21 and September 21, so in 1923, they corresponded to March 8 and September 8.

6. The Orthodox Church, since the correction of the calendar was initiated by the Pope, follows the calculation of Pascha based on March 20 according to the Julian calendar. Western Christianity also accepts the same day as the starting point, but based on the new Gregorian calendar. Thus, when the West speaks today of the spring equinox, it refers to a date that precedes by 13 days the calculation of Eastern Christianity. In the case where the (first) full moon after the spring equinox coincides, then there is a coincidence in the day of Pascha. But this happens rarely.

Of course, it must be said that the first Byzantines noted the imperfections of the Julian calendar and proposed its replacement. In 1324, the Byzantine scholar Nicephorus Gregoras, concerned with the positive sciences, proposed the correction of the calendar, which, however, was not accepted "*for fear of confusing the ignorant and dividing the Church.*" In 1450, the

philosopher G. Plethon-Gemistos drafted a calendar of his own inspiration, which, if implemented, would not have required Gregorian reform.

The Orthodox Church, moving in the spirit of the time, but also due to the papal danger, rejected the Gregorian calendar in 1583 and 1593 (synod under Patriarch Jeremiah II) (Canon 15) because the decision of the First Ecumenical Council and the Seventh Apostolic Canon, which forbids the simultaneous celebration of Christian Pascha and Jewish Passover, was set aside. Moreover, in the West, the Gregorian calendar was progressively accepted. Britain adopted it in 1752, Sweden in 1753, and Germany in 1776 due to differences in determining Pascha. However, when the dangers of proselytism seemed to diminish, the Orthodox East began to consider replacing the Julian calendar. Thus, in 1895, the Ecumenical Patriarch Anthimus VII expressed "*longings and prayers for a unified calendar for all Christian peoples.*" Positive actions were also taken with his encyclical in 1902 by Ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III. The Church of Greece assigned in 1919 the issue to a committee, which deemed it possible to change "after consultation with all the autocephalous Churches."

While awaiting the consultation, it decided to remain liturgically faithful to the Julian calendar, while the state proceeded politically to establish the new calendar, which occurred on March 1, 1923. However, the practical difficulties of the two calendars led the Church of Greece to accept the new calendar liturgically as well, without affecting the Paschalion. The change occurred on March 10, 1924, which was characterised as March 23. The Churches of Jerusalem, Russia, Serbia, and, until recently, Bulgaria and Mount Athos maintained the Julian calendar liturgically yet did not sever ecclesiastical communion with the Churches that accepted the new one.

In 1924, the Old Calendarists of Greece followed the example of the old fourteenth-century adherents, thus creating the "Old Calendarist issue," which led to a schism, an open wound in the ecclesiastical body of Greece. In this case, however, the scientifically mandated change was not weighed down, but rather the change of the calendar, which, according to the unifying content of the circular (message) of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1920, was to facilitate Ecumenism ("*...for a simultaneous celebration of the great Christian feasts by all Churches*"). Thus, the matter took on not a scientific but clearly an ecclesiological dimension.

The consequences, however, transcend the limits of this note.

The broader search of Christians, within the bounds of ecumenical dialogue, for a common celebration of Pascha and the application, consequently, of a common inter-Christian calendar, which has been discussed in recent decades, will lead to new adventures, especially if this is combined with the acceptance also from the Orthodox side, as proposed, of a fixed Sunday for

the celebration of Pascha, with the disregard and rejection of the decisions of the First Ecumenical Council, which are inviolable for the Orthodox Church.

Translated from the original Greek:

π. Γεωργίου Μεταλληνού,

Αντιμέτωποι με την πλάνη,

Εκδ. Ορθόδοξος Κυψέλη

2013

END TIMES PUBLISHING

2025